

# The Gold and the Dross

*Althusser for Educators*

*By*

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BRILL  
SENSE

LEIDEN | BOSTON

## CHAPTER 1

# A Beginner's Guide to Interpellation

We shall go on to suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way as to 'recruit' subjects among individuals (it recruits them all) or 'transforms' individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) through the very precise operation that we call *interpellation* or *hailing*. It can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace, everyday hailing...Hailing as an everyday practice governed by a precise ritual takes spectacular form in the police practice of hailing: 'Hey, you there!' (It functions in very similar forms in interpellating or summoning at school.)

LOUIS ALTHUSSER, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (2014), 191

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There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out, 'Hey, you there!' An individual (nine times out of ten, it is the one who is meant) turns around, believing-suspecting-knowing that he's the one—recognizing, in other words, that he 'really is the person' the interpellation is aimed at. In reality, however, things happen *without succession*. *The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing.*

LOUIS ALTHUSSER, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (2014), 191

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## Getting in Trouble<sup>1</sup>

Everyone gets in trouble. Especially children. My first memory of getting in trouble was at a shopping mall. I was with my father. I think I was four years old. We were getting pizza for lunch after shopping at a children's clothing store called Kids 'R' Us. At the store I saw a keychain I liked. It had a little plastic Batman attached to a short chain. While my father paid for whatever other products we were purchasing, I took the keychain and pocketed it, not knowing—I think—that this was wrong. We went to get pizza.

I had to go to the bathroom, or my father had to go to the bathroom, and we went together. As he was washing his hands at the sink I wanted to show him the keychain. I decided to bring the feet of the plastic figure out of my pocket, showing just the blue boots on gray legs. I said, "Daddy, look, Batman's feet!"

What happened next is blurry. I remember my father seeing the stolen keychain, his eyes widening. He took me back to the toy store, back to the register where I'd taken it, and had me apologize. I remember going home with him in the car, his anger. What I remember most clearly is a feeling. A hot, anxious, nervous feeling—even now I have it when I recall the memory. The sensation is like my stomach and intestines are in boiling water, or the feeling of being outside too long on a hot day. Gut-wrenching.

This feeling was the feeling of being seen by my father, and being the object of his anger. More specifically though, the feeling came from a change: everything went from normal and fine to not normal and not fine, with the added sense that I was the reason for the change. That it was me, in fact, who had done something wrong. My soul turned: I was the one responsible for the change in the situation. I realized that it was me that my father was angry at, for something that I had done with the keychain.

That was when I learned that stealing—not paying for a product at a store with money—is wrong. In our economy, our government, and our culture we pay for things we want with money. We can't just have them or take them if we want them. Even now, when I think about stealing, I have that hot fear, the gut-wrenching feeling from when my father was angry and turned my soul.

I was interpellated. Getting in trouble is a good example of being interpellated. People get into much more serious trouble than what I've just described, and it's just a small example. I was interpellated when I got in trouble, and I got with the program of not stealing. Interpellations like this happen all the time all over the place: family, school, media, sports, shops, government offices. Interpellations get us with the program of daily life in society. They are the concrete moments when we learn to live in our society. Teachable moments.

### At School

The first memory I have of getting in trouble at school, though I'm sure there were many, was in first grade. I was seven years old. Mrs. Saunders was our teacher. The room was bright. The sun was shining. I sat in the second or third row at a little pupil desk. Just like all the other students, I looked forward and paid attention to the lesson, whatever it was. Then I picked my nose and ate the mucus.

Mrs. Saunders saw me. She had been on her way to the blackboard, or maybe to her desk at the front of the room. In any case she stopped what she was doing when she saw me. In front of everyone, she faced me. She stopped and turned her shoulders, standing over us at the front of the classroom, and addressed me, just me. The full force of her whole body was oriented right at me. Unlike the moment with my father, I remember exactly what she said:

“David, that is disgusting!”

I even remember the way she said it. She drew out the “dee” sound of the word “disgusting” in a crescendo, which ended with a guttural emphasis on the “guh” sound in the middle of the word. It sounded to me like “deees-GUH-sting!”

I got that feeling again, that transition from okay-to-not okay feeling where I was, in fact, the one who was responsible. My soul turned. This time I had a big audience: my classmates all looked at me. I don't remember their reactions so much as the feeling as being singled out, that it was me, in fact, that Mrs. Saunders was talking about; me, in fact, who was doing something disgusting.

I maybe had been aware that picking my nose and eating it was illicit, unclean, or unhygienic. But I didn't really know it. I learned at that moment, I was interpellated, that we don't to pick our noses and eat it in this society.

### **Get with the Program**

Both the Batman's feet and nose-picking anecdotes show something else. In that soul-turning moment when my gut wrenched because I'd been seen doing something wrong, there was an individual behavior—something I was doing—that society doesn't permit. Essentially, my father and Mrs. Saunders were saying, “David, we don't do that around here. Get with the program.” There's a mixture of the individual and collective at this moment, a dissonance when an individual—me, in fact—did something that society—we, us—have decided to prohibit. There's a collectively agreed upon imagined relation to the world that tells us “don't steal” and “don't pick your nose.” And there are concrete moments when we learn these things deeply, so that we don't do them anymore.

Other societies at other times or places may not have the same imagined relations, but ours does. We don't steal. We don't pick our noses. I had to learn that our society has a program, that there's a way we do things around here.

Interpellation is a moment of forced integration into that program: when consent to the program gets configured.

I didn't know, but then I learned: we don't take things without paying, we don't pick our noses. The interpellation is the moment someone confronts me to tell me this and it sinks in so that I get with the program. When I believe-suspect-know that I am the one, in fact, who has not understood.

Interpellation is the completed "teachable moment." It's when I go from being an idiot to a citizen, a face in the crowd to a subject of ideology. The soul turns, the gut wrenches, and I now imagine the same relation that others do when it comes to taking things and picking my nose. After the interpellation, I am with the program: my imagination prohibits and permits the things that others' imaginations prohibit and permit.

### **Not Anything Impactful**

An interpellation isn't just something that made an impact on you, or shaped who you are today; not all impactful experiences are interpellations. But all interpellations are impactful experiences, just ones of a certain kind. Sometimes the impact is like a huge boulder falling. Other times, it's like a slow drip that eventually forms a stalagmite. Interpellations leave an impression that orients you to what others do around you, sometimes called norms, patterns of acceptable behavior. The interpellation makes you the kind of person that does the acceptable behavior. It makes it so that acceptable behavior is now part of who you are. It's second nature. To not do it would betray yourself.

You follow the pattern because it—this image—is part of who you are now.

### **I Don't Remember What I Learned in School**

I don't remember exactly what I learned in my classes at school, and it's common to hear this from students studying education: "What was the point of all that school? I don't remember a single thing!"

Yet these comments typically occur in conversations where all kinds of rules, lessons and patterns are occurring to keep the situation going. If you're saying that you don't remember anything from school, you have made a life for yourself within our society based in some part on what you learned in school. For instance, there are a number of things you learned in school that make it possible for you to say—in that way at that moment, politely—that you don't remember what you learned in school.

Why don't we remember what we learned in school, exactly?

First, there's no need to remember because what we learned in school was to become the kind of person that does this and that, which we are doing all the time. It's not just memory of facts that happens in school learning but rather the incorporation of patterns, codes, and expectations which we act out everyday. If we had to remember these things, then school would be less effective at achieving its goal. The point is that you don't have to remember what you learn.

Second, it makes sense that we wouldn't remember these patterns because through interpellations they have become part of ourselves: we are in fact the people that know that  $2+2 = 4$  and behave in this and that way, because we learned these things at school. It would be like saying, "what's the point of having lungs, I never remember to breathe!" The things we learn at school are second nature, like breathing.

Third, interpellations compose how we see, not just what we see, and it's hard to remember how we're seeing things while we see. I wear glasses, for instance. I rarely remember that what I'm seeing through my glasses are images focused by my glasses. I just see through the glasses and then assume that the world is the way it looks. I don't remember to think about my glasses all the time, I just don't think about them, because they're part of what makes my world appear the way it does. But I'm always wearing them, and I can take them off whenever I want. Or put different ones on when I want.

So it is with what we learn in school through interpellation: the real lessons are the ones we forget because they've been so deeply woven into the fabric of who we are that to remember them would mean that we didn't learn them correctly. The point is to not remember and continue believing.

### Testing

The summer of 1994 was a particularly exciting one: I'd be going to a camp for two weeks for the first time, and then traveling with my parents on vacation. I was ten years old.

Earlier that year I took several state-mandated standardized tests in reading, writing, and mathematics. I was in fourth grade. I remember feeling nervous while taking the tests: everything at school stopped, the normal routines and lessons to which I'd grown accustomed ceased and the test became our focus.

On the day of the test our teacher handed out workbooks with the image of the state of Connecticut on the front. The paper was gray, thin, and smelled like grassy pulp. I don't remember the questions themselves, but I do remember looking around and seeing my classmates taking the test also. I remember the

time written in chalk on the chalkboard in front of us, alerting us to when we'd started and when we would have to stop. I remember our teacher waiting for us to finish, watching to make sure we didn't cheat. It was a little unpleasant, but largely unmemorable.

After the school year ended, maybe the week after school was over and summer was about to begin, I remember sitting in my room. My mother knocked on the door and asked me to come outside, where our house had a small deck. I followed her. My father was sitting there in shirtsleeves. The sun was strong and my mother sat next to him. In his lap was an envelope with the image of Connecticut on the front. He reached into the envelope and pulled out a single sheet of paper, which had lines of text printed in block letters. There were numbers and words placed next to one another: my state test scores.

My father asked me to come over and look at the piece of paper. I did, and saw that under one of the categories it said "unsatisfactory." He said that if I didn't score higher on such tests in the future, then I wouldn't be allowed to go to summer camp. I remember feeling nervous and confused. It got under my skin. The feeling was a kind of anxious disturbance, a guilt without understanding. It was the first time a state test had affected my life in some way, and I didn't understand why it might be so important that I get certain scores on them. But I did understand that I had to get better scores on them in the future. The same was true for grades.

The test interpellated me in this case: I learned that I had to behave in a certain way with these tests, that around here we perform well on state tests, or else.

### Where Did My Friends Go?

I went to a private elementary school from four years old until I was eleven. The school served the wealthier Jewish community in the part of central-western Connecticut where I lived. After I graduated Maimonides Academy, I went to a public middle school, Rogers Park, serving the entire town. Danbury had roughly 60,000 people at that time. A good number of those residents were immigrants and people of color.

Rogers Park had a tracking system for its students. High-performing students with good grades took "honors" level classes, while students with mid-range grades took "regular" classes. There were special education and remedial programs as well.

The public school system can sometimes have difficulties processing information, and the school administration could not confirm that the content I

learned at Maimonides met the criteria for the honors level, except for reading and writing. I was put in regular level classes for science, math, and history, and then an honors level literature course (extra classes such as art, home economics, gym, and shop class were exempted from this stratification).

I made good friends in my science classes. I remember them distinctly. I was close to Enrique and José. They had brown skin, and spoke with accents inflected with Latin American Spanish. I saw them in most of my classes, except for literature, where there were other students I met named Jeff, Chris, and Andrew. These students had the pinkish color of skin known as white.

But race is only one social category. A friend of mine in math named James had white skin, but lived in a small house a few miles from me. His father was a truck driver and his mother had an illness and could not work. I remember his Rottweiler dog. I don't remember going to Enrique or José's houses, and have only one memory of Jose coming to my house. (I don't know if this imbalance in visiting houses was intentional.) Andrew and Jeff, however, lived in bigger houses. Their parents were doctors and businesspeople.

In seventh grade I was moved to honors science classes, as well as honors history. The mistake with my grades from Maimonides had been corrected. I saw my friends Enrique and José less and less, and saw people like Andrew and Jeff more and more. Interestingly, I saw James some more and spent time with another white friend, whose father was a construction worker, Mike.

But by then I'd noticed the change, and wondered, with a light sense of confusion that I never raised with anyone nor did anyone raise it with me, where Enrique and José had gone. They weren't in the honors level classes.

The sense of confusion about their disappearance from my life, through the subtle neglect created when no one asks, settled into a kind of obviousness and normality. Again, there was a change. This transition was not gut-wrenching, but yet my soul turned: I learned that people like Enrique and José, and increasingly people like James, were not, in fact, the kind of students in honors classes. I was the kind of person that was in honors classes, like Andrew and Jeff.

This remained true throughout high school, where I sometimes saw my former friends passing in the hallway. We barely recognized each other. We didn't say hello. When I went off to a private university in Washington, DC, I was not surprised to see that most people there were not like my friends in the sixth grade, when the public school had made a mistake.

To say that I wasn't surprised at university isn't really correct. Being surprised assumes that you're actually thinking about something, expecting it, and then something different happens. I wasn't actually thinking about the kind of person who attended classes with me at college or high school. I wasn't expecting



that people with different skin colors and different access to resources than mine would or wouldn't be present. I just didn't think about it.

The tracking system had interpellated me in this case. It had turned my soul so that I didn't think about race and class stratifications, and how schools reproduce them. I learned that it wasn't something to think about.

### **Falling in Love**

Interpellation isn't only a gut-wrenching, difficult, unpleasant moment. It's also deeply personal. The theorist Mladen Dolar says that have said that it's like falling in love.

I fell in love with my partner at a bar. It was our first date. I didn't know I was falling in love but when I think about it now that's when it happened. We'd been dancing bachata, a South American dance. The date had been going well, better than most dates I'd been on at that time. We took a break from the dance floor. I sat on a stool, ordered us two drinks, and she put her arm around my neck and leaned on me. Her hand rested on my collar bone, a friendly gesture. She didn't say anything, just put her arm around me and waited for the beers, listening to the music. It was so intimate. That's when I fell in love with her, if I had to guess. It was a transformational feeling, as though my inner life were a galaxy and there was a shift in the gravitational forces between the parts of myself. This person had arrived. When she put her arm around me I remember thinking to myself "who are you?" Something transformed within me. The physical space was the same. The bar was the bar, the stool was the stool, but I was no longer what I had been. There was something new about me and what was new about me was this person. There was a shift, a movement. I was moved. I became so interested in this person that I shifted my life significantly around her. If someone were to ask me who I am, for example, pretty soon I'd start talking about her.

People sometimes describe the process of establishing this deep connection 'falling in' love. I don't know why we say that. Maybe we fall because there is such a significant change, a reorientation of who we are, that it's outside our control. Like we're falling. But we always fall in love with someone: there's another person there. It's this other person who shifts our inner life so significantly, and the sense of the depth of that connection, is like a gravitational force.

For some psychologists, love names how we become who we are: babies fall in love with their parents and through this process develop personalities that inherit and reject certain of their features. This process of incorporating features and elements from our surroundings doesn't stop either. It keeps going, all the time.

There are things other than love that we can 'fall into.' Falling is a metaphor. We can also fall into ideology—that's an interpellation. While falling in love isn't an interpellation itself, being interpellated is like the experience of falling in love.

When religious ideology begins to function directly by interpellating the little child Louis as a subject, little Louis is already-subject—not yet religious subject, but familial subject. When legal ideology (later, let us suppose) begins to interpellate little Louis by talking to him about, not Mama and Papa now, or God and the Little Lord Jesus, but Justice, he was already a subject, familial, religious, scholastic, and so on...Finally, when, later, thanks to auto-heterobiographical circumstances of the type Popular Front, Spanish Civil War, Hitler, 1940 Defeat, captivity, encounter with a communist, and so on, political ideology (in its different forms) begins to interpellate the now adult Louis as a subject, he has already long been, always-already been, a familial, moral, religious, scholastic, and legal subject...This political subject begins, once back from captivity, to make the transition from tradition Catholic activism to advanced—semi-heretical—Catholic activism, then begins reading Marx, then joins the Communist Party, and so on. So life goes. (Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 2014, p. 193)

...we shall point out that these practices are regulated by rituals in which they are inscribed, within the material existence of an ideological apparatus, even if it is just a small part of that apparatus: a small mass in a small church, a funeral, a minor match at a sport club, a school day or a day of classes at university, a meeting or rally of a political party...Pascal says, more or less, 'Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, *and you will believe.*' (Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 2014, p. 186)

### Is Interpellation Passive?

Interpellation makes it seem like there's something that is being done to us. It seems like we are passive creatures that receive the social order, which is active. It's tempting to say society interpellates us, and that "I was interpellated by society." But we are actively doing things to be interpellated. We learn. And it isn't clear at all who or what interpellates. Certainly my father, Mrs. Saunders,

the Connecticut state test, and the tracking system at Rogers Park interpellated me. But what are they, exactly?

They are the bearers of a structure that they maintain through their actions. In saying and doing what they said and did, they reproduced imagined relations to real conditions. Both in the sense of giving birth and in the sense carrying, they were bearers of a social structure immanent in its effects.

### **Ideology = Imagined Relations to Real Conditions**

Interpellations are all about ideology. Ideology is a representation of imagined relations to real conditions. Real conditions are the complex layers of stuff that make up reality. Having an imagined relationship to the real conditions means imagining that this complex reality is one or way or another, that it's "cut and dry" or "is what it is," and then acting accordingly.

When someone says "well, it is what it is," then you know they're talking about an ideology. The ideology is a kind of guarantee where there really isn't any guarantee.

Reality is always more complicated than how ideology alludes.

Ideology presents a world that people extract from reality for certain reasons. People allude to the way things are in speech and action: this allusion is an ideology. They're not under an illusion, but rather are alluding to a world that is never as complex as reality. They allude to their imagined relation to the real conditions, which is never just "their" individual relation, but rather the social structure's.

### **Wings**

Every time an interpellation happens, an ideology gets it wings.

### **Race and Gender**

Althusser rarely, if ever, wrote about race and gender. It's a serious flaw in his work. But his ideas can be applied to race and gender. Race, for example, is a relation between people imagined with physical or cultural features (skin color, body type, language). The real conditions are that people are different in certain ways, but race imagines these differences immanently through a set of practices, all of which form a sort of caste system. Gender too: people with certain reproductive organs should look and behave in certain ways (be manly, be lady-like), should love certain people, etc.

People get interpellated into their race. They get interpellated into their gender. The interpellations vary, and happen in distinctive ways in different contexts. Race and gender are imagined relations to real conditions (which means they're not necessarily identities).

### Reproduction

Interpellations reproduce ideologies. Reproducing means creating anew, maintaining, continuing, perpetuating. It's like biological reproduction: living things create themselves anew when they reproduce. They maintain the existence of their species. They continue the passage of their traits and genes.

Reproduction is making sameness during changing circumstances.

Schools are one of the most important sites of interpellations: they tend to reproduce society as it is, but can also reproduce other kinds of societies too.

### Consent

Interpellations configure consent to ideologies. But this consent isn't express consent. No one rationally consents to the social structure through an interpellation. Rather, an interpellation is a process of configuring a kind of unconscious tacit consent, which might develop into express consent (if the ruling classes are lucky).

### Individuality

We aren't born knowing we are individuals, we must learn to become individuals by being told that we are individuals. We're interpellated as individuals and we become individuals when those around us and our environment allude to our individuality. Isn't it funny that, because of society, we're all individuals?

However, while admitting that these ideologies do not correspond to reality and, accordingly, constitute an *illusion*, we also admit that they do make *allusion* to reality and that we need only 'interpret' them to discover the reality of this world beneath the surface of their imaginary representation of it (ideology = illusion/allusion). (Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 2014, p. 181)

*THESIS I:* Ideology represents individuals' imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence. (Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 2014, p. 181)

### Images

You can't see your own eyes. While you can see sunsets and movies and taxi cabs with your eyes, your eyes can't see themselves as they are. Even if you took out your own eye and looked at it, that would be one of your eyes looking the other (and it's not clear that the eye you've taken out is still your eye). You can see a reflection of your eye, but this is only a reflection, not the eye itself. This eye-seeing problem is a big problem for humans. Your eye is the thing that sees, but because it's the thing that sees, it will never see itself like it sees other things.

If you think about your eye as if it were a person, personify your eye, they would be a tragic figure: always trying to see but never able to see themselves.

Well, it would only be a tragedy if this person wanted to see everything, including themselves, or took a particular interest in seeing themselves. But as babies, humans are exactly this way: wanting to see and discover. At a certain point, in the first six months of life, a baby wants to see themselves, but they can't. Frustrated, they look around wondering if other things are themselves and find other people and objects and creatures. In this phase, they are constantly asking, without language, "is that me?"

Anything will do to answer this urgent question. Faces, voices, objects, reflections. All of these partially answer the question, but never in full. So it never works, fully. Only partially. Just as the eye can't see itself, the self cannot know itself. I'm not the reflection I see in the mirror. I'm not the people around me. I can't know fully who I am. The baby sees their parents, familiar objects and people, their own reflection in a mirror. They say, "yes, that must be me." That sentence of consolation, it must be me, and turns into a kind of thought, layering into what becomes the ever-expanding thought about the self. The "it" in "it must be me" is a presentation, a painting done by the senses and drives, added to a gallery engaged in a never-ending exhibition called Who I Am. "It," or the thing that I must be, is a portrait of a moment, a memory in color. One way that we incorporate categories like race, gender, and class is through these portraits.

The search continues well into adulthood. People are always sort of asking this question, answering it to themselves by painting a portrait of whatever they

find and adding it to the collection. They're images. The images emerge from relations to the real conditions of existence. Images and relations together are ideology itself: imagined relations. Interpellations happen because of this constant searching for an answer to the question. An interpellation adds images to the collection. Interpellations happen because we're always open to them, always asking who we are and never getting the full answer.

Before going to a party, I look in the mirror to see how I look. I'm always frustrated by the fact that my appearance is reversed in the mirror, that people never see me the way I see myself in the mirror and that I can't know how I look to others. I can't see myself in the way that I'll be seen, always having to settle for a reversed reflection. But the problem is too difficult to solve so I just believe the image: yes, that's how I look. Fine.

But it's not. I go the party anyway, consciously satisfied but still unconsciously wondering.

### Being Guided

Because the images make up the self, they're related to how the self makes decisions. Certain images become "should" images and others "should not" images. When the self follows the should and should not images it's being guided by those images. Althusser says that we go all by ourselves with ideology, which means that we make free choices, as subjects, with our subjectivities configured to make those free choices. But because we don't know every part of ourselves, specifically how we are subjects in the social structure, we are guided by things we don't know about. Ideology isn't consciousness. It's unconscious.

### Interpellation Machine

Imagine a machine. It's about the height of a person. It looks like a coat rack, with a box-like head on top of a spine, and legs holding it steady on the bottom. The machine's "head," or top part, is a set of very thin picture frames connected by rails along their sides. There are thousands of them stacked together very tightly. There's a cage-like structure holding these frames to the spine. It contains the frames and it's spring-loaded such that the frames, when deployed, extend outward sort of like one of those joke boxing gloves at the end of an extending coat rack. When a trigger is pulled, the rail-and-frames spring out.

The machine moves in this way: a frame in the cage shoots out from the others in a certain direction, extending on an arm, so it's still connected to the

machine because of the rails. The frame comes out at you from the cage, like a blank painting on a wall that wants you to be in it and starts to chase you. The machine is secured somewhat to a wall, or some structure, but it also has wheels so it can amble around.

The frames aren't empty. They have a translucent, putty-like substance that's pliable and flexible, like a thin clay, that can capture the features of whatever it makes contact with. At first, the substance is wet and shapeable in the cage, like new concrete. But after it makes contact with whatever it aims to capture, the substance hardens, like concrete setting. It's not as hard as concrete, more like the tough rubber on a plunger or a thick rubber band.

So the machine sends out a frame of shapeable rubber in some direction, to capture something, typically a person's face, but it could be a non-human object too. It lets the arm linger on this target for just long enough to take an impression of it. Then the arm retracts back, so the frame, now hardened into a rubber portrait-impression of the target, returns to the cage.

There's a second part of the process.

On the other side of the cage with the empty frames waiting to go outwards, there is another cage. This second cage, attached to the other side of the spine, contains a complex amalgam of hardened rubber impressions, the results of the frame-catch process completed by the other side of the machine.

The rubber impressions are all grafted and layered onto one another. This combination of rubber impressions looks like a twisted ball-square, a polygon made of faces, words, places, objects...all smashed into one another so that the objects themselves maintain much of their original features, but also get stretched or compacted, distorted, as they become part of the mass. This second cage is slightly heated to keep the rubber pliable. The resulting bolus is like a terribly-made spherical cake, having no distinct form except the ever-changing and idiosyncratic mass emerging when piling rubber impressions one on top of the other and heating them.

The entire process of the interpellation machine: A frame goes out and takes the impression of its target, the machine retraces the frame back to the first cage, but then a series of little mechanical arms grab the rubber impression, now hardened, and pass it back to the second cage, where another set of arms add the new impression to the bolus. That's an interpellation. The whole thing buzzes. Imagine billions of these machines reaching out and framing and incorporating stuff around them into themselves, both other machines and stuff from their surroundings, each machine with idiosyncratic boluses resulting from the stuff they happen to frame and incorporate. That's ideology, reproducing.

### Intersectionality

People end up having races, genders, species, classes, abilities, religions, and nationalities. Any given interpellation has these categories riding it. Multiple categories. The categories will be ordered in a certain way, with primary and secondary and tertiary salience, and the categories will mix with one another like chemicals or ingredients such that the interpellation will be idiosyncratic for each individual to become subject to the ideology. Intersectionality names the myriad ways one social structure can conjure its single relation of production among such difference.

### Counter-Interpellation

Not all interpellations are successful. For an interpellation to succeed, there has to be an imagined relation to real conditions. There also has to be someone who hasn't gotten with the program. In a concrete moment, the person has to believe-suspect-know that they're the ones who aren't with the program. Then they get with the program. But a lot has to happen for this to be successful. It doesn't always work. A lot of times, people just don't get it (this has been called misinterpellation by the theorist James Martel). Other times, people are in between interpellations and are neither interpellated nor not interpellated (philosopher of education Tyson E. Lewis calls this disinterpellation). And sometimes, people consciously or unconsciously change the program.

When someone takes up and takes on an ideology in a concrete moment to shift the balance of forces in its social formation, that's what the French philosopher of language Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls a counter-interpellation. Think of the phrase "against the grain." This saying refers to the grain of wood, or the direction of the fibers in the wood. These fibers go a certain way such that it's easier to cut the wood when you cut in that direction. Cutting against this direction increases resistance and friction. At first it might seem like a counter-interpellation is just something that goes against the grain of society. But taking up and taking on an ideology to shift the balance of forces in a social formation has to have the potential to change that balance of forces. The counter-interpellation has to be able to change the very grain of the wood, not just go against that grain. Resisting is going against the grain. Counter-interpellating is changing the grain.



### A Grain of Sand

You can also use the word grain to refer to individual pieces of matter, like a grain of sand. A completed interpellation is like dropping a grain of sand on a beach. The grain comes to rest in either a big, well-developed pile or becomes part of a small heap. After millions of interpellations over time a topography develops with contours and high mounds and ditches. If enough counter-interpellations happen against the predominant balance of forces in a pile, the topography can change.

Society is like a beach in this metaphor, or layers of rock. It has a complex structure that shifts all the time, grains moving this way and that, each having tiny effects which accumulate into other bigger effects that then turn into volcanic eruptions, tectonic shifts, and the creation of continents. There are higher and lower positions; variations of grains that predominate over others; shifts and stabilizations that are more or less likely in that particular balance of forces. Society has a structure like this.

There are different forces in the structure that we can point to. One force keeps the existing structure the way it is (a “top-down,” repressive, superstructure force). Another force roots the structure (a “bottom-up” base force), arranging the grains and levels and regions in a certain way. Each of these forces continue forward in time, reproducing themselves until something changes. Personify the grains so that each grain imagines how it relates to other grains around it and the entire formation—that imagined relation is ideology.

...every social formation ‘functions on ideology,’ in the sense in which one says that a gasoline engine ‘runs on gasoline.’ (Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 2014, p. 200)

We can now say the following. It is characteristic of the Ideological State Apparatuses that they form part of the superstructure and, as such, ensure the reproduction of the relations of production behind the protective shield of the Repressive State Apparatus...However, since they ensure the reproduction of the relations of production in the ‘consciousness’ of subjects who are agents of production, agents of exploitation, and so on, we have to add that this reproduction of the relations of production by the Ideological State Apparatuses and their ideological effects on subjects...is ensured *in* the functioning of the relations of production themselves. (Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 2014, p. 201)

The base is dominated by the relations of production. The relations of production function (on the basis, of course, of material labour processes that produce objects of social utility as commodities) simultaneously as...relations of exploitation. (Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 2014, p. 202)

### Hut

Societies aren't like beaches or layers of earth exactly though, since they're made and maintained for certain purposes according to certain interests. The English philosopher G. A. Cohen says that another metaphor for a society could be a hut.

The repressive force is like a roof, holding things in place from the top down. This roof represents government, police, military, law, and court systems. This force is how society makes sure its structure doesn't fall down, and keeps the rain and sun out.

The base or bottom-up force that arranges that layout of the hut is like the floor and basement. This floor represents the economy, or modes of production. It's the way the society is rooted to the earth, connecting/using/tackling/working with ecological forces without which the society couldn't function.

The middle of the hut, or the posts and walls, are where we live: it's where family, school, culture, sports, media, religion all happen. It's covered by the government overhead and supported by the economy below. The middle region is also the thing that people experience directly, and helps to maintain consent to living in a hut with a certain kind of roof and foundation.

Ideologies are the imagined relations to the hut's design and daily routines: how it should be designed, maintained, and fashioned. Ideologies are how people go all by themselves as they live within the walls of the society. Interpellations are those teachable moments when we learn to live in the hut and keep it going: when we get with the hut's program.

### A Play

The best metaphor for society would be a combination of the beach and the hut. A play does this. In a play, there is no single author, yet there is a clear series of roles that combine to form the action. There is also a house-like structure, the theater. Society, Althusser says, is like an authorless theater.

### **Our Society: Capitalism and Democracy**

Our society in the United States, very generally speaking at least, has a capitalist economy for its base and a representative democratic government for its roof. Our culture is a complex mess of religions, nationalities, musics, foods, and routines.

United States capitalism is an economic arrangement where a relatively few people own most resources privately, and these few pay everyone else to work for them. Capitalists and workers, whether they can feel it or not, are always fighting with each other to get more for themselves. Stuff in this social formation, like nature and human labor, are worth some amount of money and are exchanged in markets. In capitalism, to make a living, you have to work for money. This is a noble scam: the amount of value you generate by working is always more than you get paid to do it. The situation couldn't be otherwise if someone else pays you work. You then have to buy things you need with money. This is all very competitive. The few who own most resources compete with each other to make the most money, while most people compete for opportunities to make enough money to live. It's up to individuals, who are "free" to compete in this setting, to make their lives together. It's possible in principle for anyone to be very rich in this arrangement, but unlikely that anyone in particular will be rich or even well taken care of. There's great wealth and poverty, with most people in the second category but always hoping to be in the first, while some have benefited from compromises made with the wealthy. Debt is everywhere. Sometimes the people who work for the people that own everything get together and demand better pay and working conditions. These are unions. Sometimes they strike to make sure the capitalists know they mean business. Only 11% of workers are unionized in the US, and this number is shrinking.

The government tries to provide some measure of help to workers. Since there are local, state, and federal governments the United States, the country has multiple repressive state apparatuses. Each of these have executive, legislative, and judicial branches by which decisions are made and implemented. We elect officials to each level of government, who then appoint officials to other posts that make our government run. We have a partially social-democratic arrangement where government provides services to citizens using tax dollars. These services include schools, infrastructure, libraries, transportation, housing, a version of healthcare, social security. Recently, these programs have been weakened. We also have the largest most powerful military in the world, on which we spend a good amount of our public money, as well as a police force that uses military tactics and resources.

The culture emerging from, reproducing, and resisting our government and economy is complex. There's urban/suburban/rural geography; Christian/non-Christian/secular religious belief; multiple heritages in slavery, colonialism, imperialism; male/female/intersex hierarchies; levels of education; access and usage of technology. Interpellations configure consent to the imagined relations to real conditions that keep this theater running. But the elements and variations and their forces in this social formation are always shifting: it could always be otherwise.

When nothing is happening, the Ideological State Apparatuses have worked to perfection. When they no longer manage to function, to reproduce the relations of production in the 'consciousness' of all subjects, 'events' happen, as the phrase goes, more or less serious events...With, at the end, some day or the other, after a long march, the revolution. (Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 2014, p. 206)

#### Note

- 1 This chapter was written as a pamphlet for student teachers and activists studying interpellation (and sometimes philosophy) for the first time.